

Subject/USFW Retiree: Dr. George Finney
January 10, 2006
Interviewed by: David Smith

David:

Good morning, it's good to see you. I would like to go over a few questions here about your involvement in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Would you start out with where you are now? I understand you have retired from your career with Canadian Wildlife Service.

Dr. Finney:

I'm actually moving towards retirement from the federal government, but I'm on Executive Exchanges presently for Bird Studies Canada down on the north shore of Lake Erie.

David:

What were some of your past experience with the Federal Service?

Dr. Finney:

I joined the Federal Service in 1977 as a senior biologist looking at native harvest, ended up as a lands claim negotiator, which is a good place to burn yourself out as a professional, even at a young age. Then I gradually transitioned into management, first in Ottawa, and then in the mid-80s I took a position as regional director of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Atlanta Canada, where I was for about 20 years, until my current assignment.

David:

What is your first recollection of your contact with the North American Waterfowl Plan?

Dr. Finney:

Well, my first contact was being called into the office of Hugh Boyd, who was then the Director of Migratory Birds in Ottawa, and being told that I needed to get a plane and head out to Saskatoon in order to meet with Jim Patterson, because he and I had been assigned to develop the Canadian position for negotiations of a North American Waterfowl Management Plan. So that would have been in December of 1979. My first trip out to sit down with Jim was in January of 1980, and I've been involved with the North American plan ever since, I'm still a counselor in the Sea Duck Joint Venture, so it's been a continuous involvement since 1979.

David:

So if you answer my question I was asking, what was your professional involvement with the North American Waterfowl Management Plan?

Dr. Finney:

For 7 years Jim Patterson and I worked at developing a Canadian position, which led to 7 months of negotiation. So dealing with the Americans was a lot easier than dealing

with our Canadian constituents. During that time we set up Wildlife Habitat Canada as an implementing agency, which was a side light but an important light. While I was on the planning committee negotiating team along with Jim I then moved to the region in Atlanta, Canada. I would say my next major involvement is that I lead development at the Eastern Habitat Joint Venture, which we got signed in 1989. I was on the Black Duck Joint Venture Board and all sorts of various counsels. I think the last piece, the most important piece, was picking up a loose end of the 1984 negotiations, which was establishment of the Sea Duck Joint Venture, which ultimately happened in 1999. But it was even noted in 1985 in our public consultations that we hadn't handled sea ducks very well, and it was noted again in the 1994 update, and the 1998 update, but we finally got that piece right.

David:

Progress! George, what would you say if you would reflect back to some of the more significant accomplishments with (unclear)? I wouldn't say milestones, the drivers that made the North American Waterfowl Management Plan what it is? Throughout that time you worked before it came into existence, the negotiations. What are some key things that made it what it is?

Dr. Finney:

I think the one of the key things was would come under the category of vision I think, and that was when North American Plan was actually envisioned back in 1976-1977, I think it was approved by the Program Review Committee in 1977, and approved as an initiative by MAFWA (The Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies) at their 1979 meetings, which were in Toronto. I think it was viewed as being a consolidation of population approach to planning, there were just so many different plans around, that it was hard to keep track of it. But when we launched into preparation of the Canadian position, and I believe the Americans were by that stage on the same page, we had concluded that fooling around with population plans was missing the mark, that we had to be brave enough to try to deal with habitat destruction issues, which until that point the wildlife community had considered to be just way too big to tackle. So I think that that would be the very first one. The second thing would be in the vision category was finding a way to deal with stabilizing regulations, but not having the plan get mixed up with the regulation setting process, which was a threat to a number of the parties. As I said before, when we actually got to sit down with the U.S. team in Remington Farms in August of 1984, we found that we had a tremendous amount in common. The processes which had been largely running on independent tracks, or quasi-independent tracks, had actually taken us to more or less the same place, but then there was the question of how to do it. I think the obviously next big step is when we actually signed the plan, it was known as the "No Wampum Plan" wildly because there was no firm way, no firm strategy about how to get money to it. Following the signature of the plan in May of 1986, some of the plan negotiators including Jim and myself went down to the 1986 IAFWA (International Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies) Meetings to explain what we had, and at that meeting there were a number of state-side people that came forward and said, "We really like what we see, and we think we can help," and that lead to the First Step Projects. The First Projects were tremendously important in terms of just

proving concept, and the proving concept then lead to the federal cabinet submissions and allocations in both Canada and The United States.

David:

Let me just interrupt here. What, in a nutshell, what is the First Step Project?

Dr. Finney:

The First Step Project is we identified some high-profile projects in Canada, and we adjusted the ratio and the plan for funding. Habitat projects were deemed to be 75/25, whereas the First Step Project would change that to 50/50. We basically sought ways of implementing important projects in Canada on a 50/50 basis.

David:

The 50/50 meaning....?

Dr. Finney:

Meaning 50% Canadian funds and 50% American funds, and there were three or four of them in Canada in my region, Grand Lakes Meadows was one of them, I believe (unclear) Marsh area was another, and then I think Bass Mountain Lake was another. In that business a number of states came forward, lead by Gary Myers, who was then in 1986 the President of IAFWA. He was definitely a cheerleader for this right from the beginning. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was a key implementer in terms of providing a vehicle to transfer money. So I think those were key steps, and then there was just a lot of hard work and a lot of good decisions by a lot of folks in order to get it implementing. But I'm sure I missed something important.

David:

Well, I interrupted your train of thought, but thanks for explaining the First Step Projects. Is there anything you would want to point to for all these steps up through the late 80s and 90s? You already mentioned the Sea Duck Joint Venture fairly recently as tying up loose ends, is there anything in the 90s or even the first four or five years of this century that stand out?

Dr. Finney:

Well, for me personally I ended up by virtue of a number of changes in personnel in the Canadian side, as being the chairman of the Canadian portion of North American Planning Committee through the negotiations over the most recent update, and I found that to be a very interesting exercise, which I think we have achieved some level of renewal and some additional focus on science, which is important to me. We also began to introduce, thought not without some difficulty, some of the modern challenges facing waterfowl, such as climate change, which is not everybody's most prominent list as being of something in importance, but from the Canadian viewpoint, extremely important to waterfowl and looking into the future in terms of taking a look at what the models are telling us in terms of water availability, particularly on the prairies and what's happening to the Canadian Arctic. So, if the plan is going to be successful, it has to deal not with just the issues of the 1970s, not just with the crop damages and the lead shots and the

other things that were very prominent as we were going into the 80s and through negotiations, but we have to be very mindful of what are facing waterfowl populations in the current time as well.

David:

Thank you. Let me ask to look ahead and the challenges ahead, can you point to a factor or several factors that has made North American Waterfowl Management Plan different from other conservation initiatives, and successful in your 20 years of implementation?

Dr. Finney:

Well, I think the vision was the correct vision, and there were many, many doubters during the early 1980s about that being the right vision. They had to all be convinced one by one that it was in their best interest. Surprisingly, in checking my notes for example I found that Ducks Unlimited, Inc., was one of the main doubters of the plan, and it took special meetings and people flying down to Louisiana to talk to some of the main parties down there and convincing them that this was not only in the interest of waterfowl, but it was in the interest of Ducks Unlimited Canada or Ducks Unlimited States, and clearly Ducks Unlimited involvement in this whole business has been critical.

David:

Well let me ask you a follow up to that, it's really important is as contemporary conservation people look at the Waterfowl Plan and what they see as a twenty year absolute success, and many of those people don't have any idea of how it got started and some of obstacles and controversy, so could you elaborate a little bit more on as it was coming together the doubters, what were they doubting, some of those difficulties, because that is not apparent today.

Dr. Finney:

Well, there were a lot of folks that were really concerned that we were going to be meddling with the regulatory setting process, and that their focus was principally on allocation of harvest and what was fair allocation, and what was fair between Canada and The United States, and real concern that a North American plan was going to lead to American's interfering with the Canadian regulatory setting process or vice-versa. That was one of them. In Canada on the prairies there were people that felt that the benefits that the Americans were getting meant that they needed to pay a whole lot more than we ended up settling on. We were going into a period too of drought in the '80s, and so the duck years weren't very good. One of the things that came along that surprised us was that there was a feeling held by a constituency on the prairies that ducks were flying rats, that they were principally pests eating crops, and that if we were going to encourage pestilence on the prairies, that what we needed to do was to build into the plan compensation mechanisms for the farmers in order to help them endure the plague that we were bringing upon them. It was a stronger movement from a segment on Canadian Prairies, lead by some provincial agricultural departments, that the plan had to include crop damage compensation, which of course we knew was never going to fly in a continental context. So we had to work our way around that substantially. Then there was the question of simply how would you imagine, even if you could imagine the

money, which was huge by waterfowl manager standards, how could you manage a delivery mechanism that did not get us so entangled in legalistic problems that we would never get out of it, and that was the concept of the joint venture. As my recollection of the concept of the joint venture, which being non-legal entities, but with still binding relationships through joint venture structure, it came up, I think, through the negotiations themselves because I believe that both Canada and United States negotiators went into the meeting wondering how in the world, even if we could get to agreeing on the objectives and a huge money target, how would we do this without getting ourselves tied up in legalese?

David:

Let me ask you George is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't covered as far as your reflections on your involvement and contributions to the Waterfowl Plan?

Dr. Finney:

Well, looking back on my career, there is a few things that I can look back and say, "You did good." This is one of them, for sure.

David:

Super.

KEY WORDS: Dr. George Finney, North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Canadian Wildlife Service, Executive Exchanges for Bird Studies Canada, senior biologist, lands claim negotiator, regional director of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Atlanta Canada, Hugh Boyd, Director of Migratory Birds in Ottawa, Saskatoon, Jim Patterson, Sea Duck Joint Venture, Wildlife Habitat Canada, Eastern Habitat Joint Venture, Black Duck Joint Venture Board, MAFWA (The Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies), Remington Farms, "No Wampum Plan," IAFWA (International Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies), First Step Projects, Grand Lakes Meadows, Bass Mountain Lake, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Ducks Unlimited, Inc., Ducks Unlimited States